

Sonus faber Guarneri Tradition

Born of its policy of continual evolution, Sonus faber's latest Guarneri standmount moves the 'tradition'
 Review: José Vitor Henriques Lab: Keith Howard

Baby of Sonus faber's latest Homage Tradition range of loudspeakers, the two-way ported Guarneri Tradition, costing £10,500, is the fourth iteration (fifth if you count the Palladio) of the original Guarneri standmount. This latest iteration follows the Memento and Evolution versions, since Head of R&D Paolo Tezzon and Chief Design Officer Livio Cucuzza took on the mantle of rewriting founder Franco Serblin's book on loudspeaker design.

Until now they have acquitted themselves very well indeed, both with new designs from scratch including the Aida [HFN Apr '12], Liliom [HFN Jun '15] and particularly 'Il Cremonese' [HFN Aug '16], and the revamping of existing models – the Ex3ma [HFN Jul '14] comes to mind here. The present Homage Tradition line consists of the standmount Guarneri and the Amati [HFN Oct '17] and Serafino floorstanders [HFN Feb '18].

The speaker cabinet's iconic lute shape has been retained, but since other manufacturers now use it, Livio explained that the shape, which allows for more internal volume, was further inspired by another Italian icon: the Riva Aquarama motorboat. This craft boasts mahogany panelling with maple inlays on its deck, not to mention metal accents and luxurious leather finishes. Sonus faber even featured one in a video used to promote its Tradition collection to underline the point.

I see the boat as a metaphor for Livio's mission to connect the two banks of the 'hi-fi river'. On the one side sits tradition while on the other lies the modern world with its thirst for new designs having exemplary technical performance. So, while the original string grille adorns the Guarneri Tradition's cabinet, the speaker now stands on an elegant carbon fibre

pedestal, shaped like a boat keel. This not only lends the whole speaker a sense of airiness and stability, but also confers 'forward movement', thus counteracting the stagnancy often perceived to be inherent in 'tradition'. Meanwhile, the stand's metal top plate is secured tightly to the loudspeaker's base with three pins, and the bottom plate is mounted atop four 'Silent Spikes', which are metal cones damped with sorbothane.

FLEXIBLE RESPONSE

The original Guarneri was made of solid slabs of wood, and at the time Sonus faber could build no more than ten pairs a month. Today the marque is sold in more than 40 countries worldwide, so if it was to meet demand the company had

to find a way to speed up production without sacrificing quality. Instead of sculpting the timber, the Guarneri Tradition's sidewalls are made from flexible sheets of wood to facilitate the curves, reinforced

with top and bottom aluminium plates and a finned backbone to form an internal 'Exoskeleton'. This frame also houses both the vertical rectangular foam-damped reflex vent or 'Stealth Ultraflex System', just below the double output terminals for bi-wiring – a solution borrowed from the Olympica series [HFN May '14 and Mar '15].

The high-gloss side panels are either veneered with wengè – a chocolate coloured tropical wood – with horizontal maple inlays, or violin red walnut with black inlays. The top plate is also finished

RIGHT: The matching stand features a carbon-fibre tube with heavy alloy base. Drivers include the H28 XTR-04 'Arrow Point' Damped Apex Dome tweeter, with neodymium motor, and W15 XTR-04 foam/paper cone mid/bass driver



THE LEGACY

Franco Serblin, the founder of Sonus faber, was like a brother to me. I loved the man not only for what he did, but also for who he was. For him, *anima legata* was not just the soul of a string instrument applied to a loudspeaker, for Franco put his own soul into everything he created. Personally, I am delighted that Paolo Tezzon (head of R&D) and Livio Cucuzza (Chief Design Officer for the McIntosh Group) are following in his footsteps while also carving out a path of their own. I see Livio playing the role of Hermes, the messenger of gods, the go-between who leads souls on their way to the afterlife, by reviving discontinued designs. And Paolo Tezzon as Prometheus, for instilling a new technological fire of life into them. Sonus faber lives on through them and the supporting team that includes Director of Marketing Fiore Cappelletto. In the year of Sonus faber's 35th Anniversary I salute them all, and wish that they'll continue to surprise me so positively for many years to come. *Auguri!*

with wood to match the side panels and it also sports a circular synthetic glass central inlay bearing the Sonus faber logo. Meanwhile, the front baffle is 'dressed to kill' in either a brown or black leather outfit, and a violin-shaped hard rubber accent with metal outlines accepts the drivers. To these eyes this latter feature looks like a keyhole you feel tempted to peep through to watch the music playing. Another smartly hidden symbol of the transition between two parallel worlds?

The tweeter used is the same high performance 28mm silk dome H28 XTR-04 'Arrow Point' Damped Apex Dome, with neodymium motor and a wooden labyrinth rear chamber, as found in the Liliom and 'Il Cremonese'. The midwoofer is the new 150mm 'ultra dynamic linearity' W15 XTR-04 foam/paper cone driver, also with a neodymium motor system. The 'Paracross topology' crossover (you need a glossary for all the elaborate names you come across reading Sf brochures) is said to be optimised for amplitude/phase response and spatial/temporal performance, with a 'hand-over' frequency of 2.5kHz.

PULLING STRINGS

The speakers were placed in a moderately large, acoustically-inert room, 3m apart and 1.5m from the rear and side walls, toed-in towards the listening seat which was placed 4m from the drivers. The amplifier used was a Dan D'Agostino Momentum Integrated [HFN Dec '14] while the source was PS Audio's DS Memory Player/PW DirectStream DAC [HFN May '18]. All cabling was by Nordost.

I have lived happily for many years with the Electa Amator and Extrema and still own a pair of original Concertinos. And, of course, the Guarneri, which I couldn't decide whether to sit and just look at, or to listen to all day. It played string quartets or piano and violin duets

like no other speaker, perhaps with the exception of the Quad ESL-57. Salvatore Accardo, the famous Italian violinist, was presented with a pair of Guarneris, serial number 002, in 1993. And who else could best vouch for this speaker's accurate reproduction of violins, such as Amati's Carlo IX (1566), Guarneri's Quarestani (1689) and Stradivari's Il Cremonese (1715), which Accardo used in succession to record *I Violini di Cremona, Omaggio a Kreisler*, accompanied by pianist Laura Manzini [Fonè 003 SACD]? The sessions were recorded with valve microphones (Neumann U47) to analogue tape (a Nagra IV-S) and transferred directly to DSD. The monitor speakers were, you guessed it, Sonus faber Guarneri Homage.

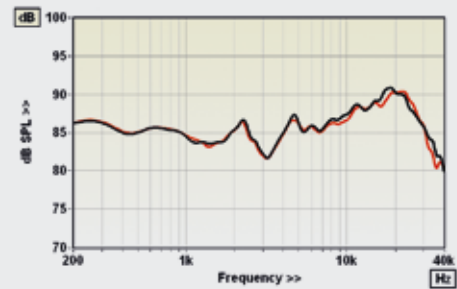
I played a few tracks from this very same recording through the Guarneri Tradition and these speakers can still pull the trick of differentiating the sound of all three violins. The original Guarneri was voiced (and built) like a fine instrument, with violins in mind, and its string performance was unparalleled. Now, within the limits of physics and with the right amplification, the Guarneri Tradition encompasses the dynamics of the whole orchestra and not just the strings. And it goes louder, with an enthusiastic upper bass bravado, whereas the lower bass is no longer afflicted by distortion caused by chuffing from the reflex system. It sounds tuneful and keeps the tempo well, not attempting to descend to depths where it cannot breathe.

On the other hand, some of the original design's treble lushness and midrange smoothness has been traded for better dynamics, a tighter bass and a 'plasticity' that widens the new speaker's scope. Just listen to Erich Kunzel and the Cincinnati Pops Orchestra playing Tchaikovsky [Telarc SACD 60541]. Telarc was known for over-the-top dynamics and all the huge instrumental forces involved on this →

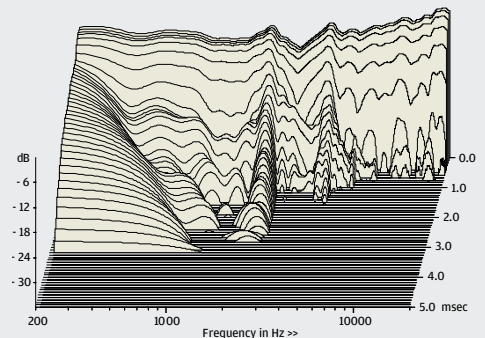
SONUS FABER GUARNERI TRAD.

A downside of Sonus faber's curved loudspeaker forms is that they reduce internal volume compared to a rectangular box of the same overall dimensions. So the Guarneri Tradition is, in effect, even more compact than it looks. But by exploiting low impedance it achieves a trade-off of sensitivity and bass extension that many potential buyers will welcome. Its specified sensitivity of 87dB SPL at 1m for 2.83V input is about 1dB optimistic according to our measured pink noise figure of 86.1dB, but entirely in keeping with expectations of a speaker this size. Bass extension – our diffraction-corrected nearfield measurement recorded 40Hz (-6dB re. 200Hz) – is better than you might suppose, but the response is peaked at 51Hz and falls away rapidly below that.

The corollary is that the Guarneri Tradition is not a notably easy speaker to drive, albeit no worse than many competitors. The nominal 4ohm impedance is entirely in line with our measured minimum of 3.6ohm but impedance phase angles are high enough to drop the EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) to a low of 1.7ohm at 142Hz, compounded by a further dip to 2.2ohm at 464Hz. Forward frequency responses, measured at 1m on the tweeter axis [Graph 1, below], show a distinct presence band suckout, worsened by a dip just above the 2.5kHz crossover, and rising treble output above 7kHz, which listening a little off-axis will quell. Response errors are consequently on the high side at ±4.6dB and ±4.3dB (200Hz-20kHz). Pair matching is ±1.0dB but drops to a fine ±0.7dB below 16kHz. The CSD waterfall [Graph 2] shows the response peaks at 2.2kHz and 4.6kHz are associated with resonances. KH



ABOVE: Forward response indicates a depressed presence band relative to a rising (high) treble



ABOVE: Cabinet modes are mild but driver resonances at 2.2kHz and 4.6kHz are clear here and in Graph 1

LEFT: Crossing over at 2.5kHz, the mid/bass driver works out of a rear vent in the spine of the speaker. A quartet of multi-way binding posts allows for bi-wiring/amping. These are Sonus faber's own flanged type and easy to tighten

in relation to the tweeter axis. I wish the pillar height could be adjusted, or ordered to taste. Of course, you can always tilt the loudspeakers so that they are firing downwards a little by adjusting the height of the stands' rear spikes.

SWEET CHERRY

What about the treble? Well, it's the proverbial sweet cherry atop a delicious midrange cake: crystal clear, pitch accurate and harmonically delicate. Play *The Desmond Project* by The John Basile Quartet [Chesky CHDVD178] and the evasive shimmering of cymbals as they are gently struck by Payton Crossley's brushes, which can often sound like white noise elsewhere, is truthfully reproduced.

And it also rose to the challenge of a pure soprano voice, Emma Kirkby's vocal on 'Tu fedel? Tu costante?' from *Handel, Italien Cantatas* [AAM/Hogwood; L'Oiseau-Lyre 414 4732] being delivered with perfect enunciation and clarity. I used to play this to death on the original Guarneri, and with the Tradition her voice still seems to fly high above the gorgeous sound of the orchestra, which features three Amatis and two Strads. To the question 'Are you faithful?', the Guarneri Tradition responded with a resounding 'Yes!', unlike the frivolous Fileno, according to the libretto. ☺



recording were reproduced with faithfulness and true panache within a wide and deep soundstage, all the instruments enjoying pin-point imaging. True, I heard 'bottoming' from the small midwoofer while trying to reproduce the hefty drum whacks from the *Capriccio Italien*, but then if you are looking for more wallop go for the Amati instead or, dare I say it, add a subwoofer.

Otherwise, the midrange was fast, open, revealing of fine detail and low in coloration. A mild hint of hollowness intruded on instruments and the vocal while listening to Eric Bibb's *Just Like Love* [Opus 3 SACD 21002] but I found this to be mostly dependent upon my seating position

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Two-way vented, standmount monitors do not come much better than this. And I mean the sound alone. Because when it comes to its looks and quality of finish, the Guarneri Homage Tradition is in a class of its own, whether your choice falls on chocolate (wengè) or strawberry (violin red). For half the price you get 90% of its big brother's, the Amati's, sound and better timbral fidelity than with the Serafino.

Sound Quality: 86%



HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83V – Mean/IEC/Music)	87.7dB/86.1dB/85.3dB
Impedance modulus: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	3.6ohm @ 229Hz 38.4ohm @ 86Hz
Impedance phase: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	-62° @ 105Hz 45° @ 862Hz
Pair matching/Resp. error (200Hz–20kHz)	±1.0dB/ ±4.6dB/±4.3dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	40Hz / 37.5kHz/37.3kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	1.4% / 0.1% / 0.6%
Dimensions (HWD) / Weight (each)	377x239x375mm / 16kg